PETER MILLIGAN • MARCELO FRUSIN

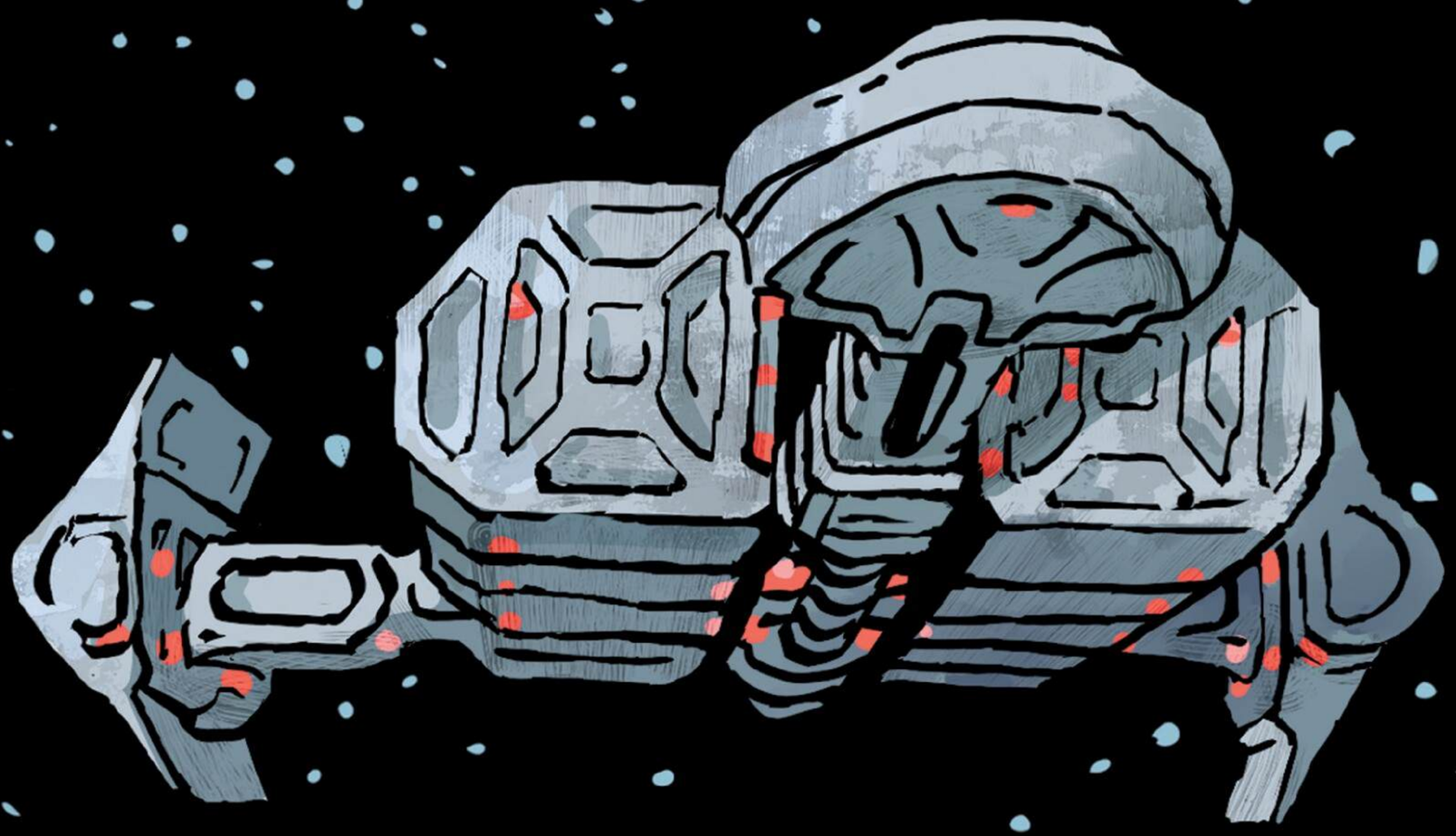
SACRAMENT

"MILLIGAN AND FRUSIN ARE AT THE TOPS OF THEIR GAMES WITH THIS FASCINATING TAKE ON FAITH, SIN, AND TERROR."
—GREGG HURWITZ

AWA

IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 2999,
MANKIND HAS ESCAPED EARTH...
BUT IT HASN'T ESCAPED ITS DEMONS.

SACRAMENT



PETER MILLIGAN
WRITER

MARCELO FRUSIN
ARTIST

SAL CIPRIANO
LETTERER

AWA @AWA_studios @awastudiosofficial @awastudiosofficial awastudios.net

M. FRUSIN
2022

THE YEAR OF OUR LORD 2999.

EVEN WITH THE MASKS, THE AIR BURNS OUR THROATS AND LUNGS WITH A TANG OF SWEET CORROSIVE SEWAGE.

COME, FATHER. QUICK, BEFORE WE'RE SEEN.

I HAVE A VERY BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS.

THOUGH IT CAN BARELY BE SAID TO BE OUR DAUGHTER ANYMORE.

OUR DAUGHTER'S THIS WAY, FATHER.

IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN I'D FEARED.

UHHH... UHHH... UHHH...

THIS Y-YOUNG WOMAN NEEDS A DOCTOR.

THE SITE MEDICS CAN'T DO ANYTHING. AND WE CAN'T AFFORD A PSYCHO-SURGEON.

LOOK AT HER, T-TELL ME SHE AIN'T POSSESSED BY A DEMON.

IF TH-THAT'S THE CASE...I...I'M REALLY NOT QUALIFIED...

BUT WE HEARD HOW YOU FOUGHT THE DEVIL ON ***NEW SATURN***, FATHER.

TH-THAT WAS...THAT WAS ***F-FIFTEEN YEARS AGO***. ANYWAY, I R-REMEMBER NONE OF WHAT HAPPENED THAT DAY.

FOR PITY'S SAKE, AT LEAST LAY YOUR HANDS ON HER! SAY YOU'LL ***TRY*** TO HELP!

OF COURSE FATHER VASS WILL ***TRY***. HE'S THE FINEST MAN I KNOW. IF ANYONE CAN HELP YOUR DAUGHTER, ***HE*** CAN.

OH, GOD.

LOOK AT ME. HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO CURE ANYONE?

A MAN WHO CAN'T EVEN CURE HIMSELF.

GOOD GOD, HER SKIN!

OUR MOTHER-FATHER... WHO ART IN THE COSMOS...

I BESEECH YOU.

PLEASE GOD, IF YOU EVER DEIGN TO HEAR ME AGAIN, DO THIS ONE THING.

HELP THIS GIRL. I BEG YOU.

UGH... UGHH... UGH...

THE SMELL?

INDESCRIBABLE.

F-FATHER, IS...IS THAT THE SMELL OF THE *EVIL ONE?*

SHE'S BURNING UP. GET SOME WATER.

WATER!

*MAYBE GOD **DOES** LISTEN TO MY PRAYER. MAYBE HE **DOES** HELP HER.*

BECAUSE SHE'S DEAD WITHIN TEN MINUTES.

THE PARENTS DON'T SAY THEY BLAME ME. THEY DON'T NEED TO.

BUT I SEE IT IN THEIR EYES.

THEY THINK I'M A CHARLATAN.

A FAKE.

THEY'RE RIGHT, OF COURSE.

THEY'RE RIGHT.

AN HOUR LATER WE'RE HEADED FOR A NEW COLONY, ANOTHER MEETING OF THE FAITHFUL.

I'M STARTING TO GET CLAMMY SHAKES. PERIPHERAL BLURRING OF VISION.

THE FAMILIAR ABYSS CLOSING IN.

FEELING THE WEIGHT OF THE TRANSUB IN MY PALM, I AM IMMEDIATELY CALMER...

AND WHEN I HOLD IT TO MY **OCULOS DEI,** THOSE REGIONS OF MY PARIETAL CORTEX KNOWN AS THE **GOD LOCUS** ARE IGNITED.

AND FOR ONE BRIEF, SACRED MOMENT...

OH...

PEACE.

STEADIER NOW, I CHECK THE DEAD GIRL'S SYMPTOMS INTO SEVERAL MEDICAL DATABASES.

ARE YOU ALL RIGHT, FATHER? ONLY--

I'M FINE, RAIS. REALLY.

NO ONE COULD HAVE DONE MORE THAN YOU DID TO EXORCISE THAT DEMON, FATHER.

NOVICE RAIS HAS BEEN WITH ME FOR A YEAR.

POOR DELUDED GIRL.

DEMON? THAT YOUNG WOMAN DIED OF A RARE BUT DOCUMENTED DISEASE CAUSED BY THE PARTICULAR MINERALS AND HEAVY METALS SHE WAS FORCED TO LIVE AND WORK WITH.

SHE DIED BECAUSE OF LOUSY WORKING AND LIVING CONDITIONS.

B-BUT THE SMELL...

THAT WAS INDUSTRIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL POISONING!

SHE DIDN'T NEED A PRIEST--SHE NEEDED A REVOLUTION!

I...I...

I...I'M SORRY, RAIS. I SHOULDN'T HAVE SHOUTED AT YOU. LET'S B-BOTH GET SOME REST. WE HAVE A BUSY DAY TOMORROW.

AS IT TURNS OUT, NOT SO BUSY: THE MASS IS POORLY ATTENDED.

IT SEEMS THERE HAVE BEEN SOME **PURGES** ON THIS COLONY LATELY. OR MAYBE A SIMPLE LOSS OF FAITH.

C7

C5

THOUGH GOD KNOWS FAITH IS ABOUT ALL THEY HAVE ON SOME OF THESE MISERABLE **EARLY PLANETS.**

MAY THE SPIRIT OF THE DIVINE TOUCH YOU.

UH!

AMEN!

AS I ADMINISTER **TRANSUBSTANTIATION,** I THINK HOW LONG AGO PRIESTS ACTUALLY USED **WAFER** AND **WINE.**

THEY WERE SIMPLER TIMES.

BEFORE MANKIND DISCOVERED NON-NEWTONIAN SUB-GRAVITATIONAL TRAVEL AND ESCAPED A PLANET THAT COULD NO LONGER CONTAIN HIM.

A TIME WHEN ROME WAS A **PLACE** AND NOT A SHIP.

WHERE A 400-YEAR-OLD POPE WATCHES OVER HER SCATTERED, DIMINISHING FLOCK.

THUS DOES MY MIND WANDER AS I GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF BEING A PRIEST. A RELIC FROM A BYGONE AGE, LEFT BEHIND BY MODERN MAN.

MAY THE SPIRIT OF THE DIVINE TOUCH YOU.

THERE'S SOMETHING FAMILIAR ABOUT THE NEXT ONE.

IS THIS A HOT MEMORY?

OR SIMPLY MY LASCIVIOUS IMAGINATION?

BOTH ARE SINS. IF I STILL BELIEVED IN SUCH A THING.

MAY THE SPIRIT OF THE DIVINE--

FATHER!

YOU MUST GO NOW, FATHER!

WHY? WHAT IS IT?

WARDENS!

THE PENALTIES FOR ATTENDING RELIGIOUS CEREMONIES ARE HARSH: FINES, IMPRISONMENT, FORCED EXILE.

*THE PUNISHMENT FOR **CONDUCTING** A RELIGIOUS CEREMONY IS EVEN **WORSE:***

"RE-EDUCATION" IN THE SHAPE OF PENAL COLONIES AND NEUROSURGERY.

HIDING IN PRIEST HOLES.

FLEEING THROUGH WELL-WORN ESCAPE ROUTES.

MOVING FROM ONE COMMUNITY--AND ONE PLANET--TO THE NEXT.

THIS IS OUR LIFE.

THIS IS, IF YOU WILL, OUR **MISSION.**

WE'VE BEEN SMUGGLED ABOARD A FREIGHTER SHIPPING SOMETHING TOXIC TO ANOTHER PLANET.

IS IT TRUE WHAT THEY DO TO US IF THEY CATCH US?

YOU MEAN, SEND US TO A ***LABOR PLANET?*** YES, RAIS. IT WILL--

I'M TALKING ABOUT HOW THEY ***OPERATE*** ON OUR BRAIN! HOW THEY CUT OUT OUR ***RELIGION.***

YOU MEAN THE REMOVAL OF OUR ***GOD LOCUS?***

I C-CAN'T THINK OF ANYTHING WORSE, CAN YOU, FATHER?

I DON'T TELL HER THAT PART OF ME LONGS TO BE CAUGHT.

TO HAVE THE SHABBY REMNANTS OF MY FAITH SURGICALLY REMOVED.

I FALL ASLEEP THINKING ABOUT NOVICE RAIS' WARM, NAKED YOUNG BODY.

AND ASK THE GOD I NO LONGER BELIEVE IN TO MAKE ME BETTER THAN THIS.

THE REMNANTS OF THIS GOD SURVIVE ON THE FIRST PLANETS--THOSE WORLDS FIRST COLONIZED BY MANKIND WHEN WE FLED EARTH.

BUT THERE IS NO RELIGION AND NO NEED FOR THE LIKES OF ME ON THE SO-CALLED **NEW PLANETS.**

YOUR REPORT, WARDEN CHABAN?

SP-SPYMASTER MARLOV...MY W-WARDENS WERE GRIEVOUSLY IMPEDED BY ACTIONS OF LOCALS A-AND--

JUST GIVE ME THE DAMNED REPORT, CHABAN.

THE PRIEST KNOWN AS VASS HAS ESCAPED. WE THINK HE'S OFF-WORLD. LIKELY DESTINATION OVID MINOR.

THEN CONTINUE YOUR SEARCH. REPORT BACK WHEN YOU HAVE MORE NEWS.

SIR, IF I HAD MORE MEN. AND SOME DECENT **SYNTHS**--

MY SPIES INFORM ME THAT THIS VASS IS A PITIFUL KIND OF PRIEST.

ADDICTED TO TRANSUB. AN INCORRIGIBLE BEDDER OF WOMEN.

IS THIS TRUE?

Y-YES, SIR. WE BELIEVE SO.

THEN YOU'VE GOT QUITE ENOUGH RESOURCES TO CATCH HIM.

I AWAIT YOUR NEXT REPORT.

AN INCORRIGIBLE BEDDER OF WOMEN?

SOUNDS LIKE HALF OF THE GOVERNMENT. THOUGH BEING ***SPYMASTER***, YOU'D KNOW ALL ABOUT THAT.

CITIZEN RELISH, WHAT'S THE HEAD OF ***PLANET SECURITY*** DOING HERE?

IF YOU COULD REMOVE YOUR GAZE FROM THE DISTANT PLANETS FOR ONE MOMENT...

"...WE HAVE SOME MORE *LOCAL* DIFFICULTIES."

I DIDN'T THINK THINGS LIKE THIS HAPPENED ON CAL IV.

THEY DON'T. OR THEY *SHOULDN'T*.

IT'S A JOB FOR THE PSYCH POLICE. I MEAN, THIS IS OBVIOUSLY THE WORK OF A MADMAN.

JUST TELL ME WHAT YOU SEE, MARLOV.

SIGNIFYING?

AN... INVERTED CRUCIFIX.

ALL RIGHT, ORIGINALLY THE CROSS OF SAINT PETER. PETER FELT UNWORTHY OF BEING MARTYRED IN THE SAME MANNER AS JESUS, SO WAS CRUCIFIED UPSIDE DOWN.

WASN'T THE INVERTED CROSS LATER ADOPTED BY *SATANISTS?*

COINCIDENCE, RELISH. THERE IS NO RELIGION ON CAL IV.

YOUR MADMAN SIMPLY HUNG HIS VICTIM UPSIDE DOWN. NOW IF YOU DON'T MIND, I'VE GOT A BUSY SCHEDULE...

WAIT. THERE'S MORE.

1

A PREVIOUSLY LOVING AND STUDIOUS TEENAGER TAKES A LASER BLADE AND SLAUGHTERS HIS PARENTS. THEN MOVES ON TO HIS YOUNGER SISTER.

BEFORE HE KILLS ***HIMSELF*** HE USES THEIR BLOOD TO PAINT ***THESE.***

MORE COINCIDENCE?

1

2

3

OUR SCIENTISTS THINK A PARTICULARLY MALIGN ***ALIEN INTELLIGENCE*** IS AT WORK, MAKING NORMALLY LAW-ABIDING CITIZENS COMMIT THESE ATROCITIES.

I HAVE ANOTHER THEORY. A PRIEST HAS BEEN SMUGGLED ONTO THE PLANET...AND IS TWISTING OUR CITIZENS' MINDS...

A ***SATANIC*** PRIEST?

WHY NOT? DO ANY OF ***YOUR*** ROGUE PREACHERS HAVE A ***PROBLEM*** WITH GOD, MARLOV?

FATHER VASS! THE RESPONSE! THE *ROMAN RITUAL!*

I...IN THE N-NAME OF...

UGH...UGHHH... STINK...M-MY FLESH...STINKS... VILE...

VASS, IN THE NAME OF GOD!

YOU ARE MINE, PRIEST...

MINE.

"FATHER! FATHER VASS...!"

FATHER, WAKE UP...

UGHH... UGHH? R-RAIS??

YOU WERE SCREAMING IN YOUR SLEEP AGAIN, FATHER. WAS THE DEVIL TRYING TO UNDO YOU?

E-EXCUSE ME?

YOU SAID SO YOURSELF: WHEN THE PIOUS REST, THE DEVIL TRIES TO UNDO THEM.

I...S-SAID THAT?

IN YOUR SERMON TO THE FUSION WORKERS ON PLANET PAX II. IT WAS ONE OF YOUR FINEST.

Y-YOU REMEMBER ***ALL*** OF MY SERMONS, NOVICE RAIS?

I DO MY BEST, FATHER. THOUGH I ADMIT, I FIND SOME OF THEM A LITTLE HARD TO FOLLOW.

THE BELIEVERS ARE GATHERING. I'LL LEAVE YOU TO YOUR ***MORNING PRAYER.***

YES. MY MORNING PRAYER.

OR THE NEAREST THING I GET THESE DAYS.

THE MASS IS EVEN SMALLER AND MORE MISERABLE THAN USUAL. HARDLY WORTH COMING TO THE COLONY AT ALL.

BUT CAN THIS THING BE MEASURED BY **NUMBERS ALONE?**

ONE HOLDS BACK, NOT WANTING THE TRANSUB. AND WITH A FLASH OF INSIGHT I SUDDENLY **KNOW.**

I KNOW HOW HE'D HAVE HAD HIS REASONS FOR TALKING TO THE AUTHORITIES.

KNOW HE IS MY OWN PERSONAL **JUDAS.**

WARDENS!

THERE'S ALWAYS SOME SECRET ESCAPE ROUTE.

I GO THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF FLEEING.

JUST AS RECENTLY I HAVE BEEN GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS OF BEING A **PRIEST.**

BUT MY HEART'S REALLY NOT IN IT.

FATHER! COME ON! THEY'RE GAINING ON US!

I...I'VE TURNED MY ANKLE, RAIS. YOU GO AHEAD.

SAVE YOURSELF.

W-WOULD OUR LORD HAVE LEFT...*UGH*...A LAME MAN BEHIND, FATHER?

YES! IF HE'D HAD ANY SENSE! LEAVE ME AND GO. ***GO!***

FATHER VASS.

I CAN'T TELL YOU WHAT A *PLEASURE* THIS IS.

RAIS AND I ARE SEPARATED.

MAYBE IT'S POLICY NOT TO HAVE A PRIEST AND HIS NOVICE ON THE SAME PENAL PLANET.

MAYBE THAT'S FOR THE BEST.

I'LL NO LONGER HAVE TO TRY TO BE THE MAN RAIS THINKS I AM.

WON'T HAVE TO SEE HER **DISAPPOINTMENT** WHEN SHE SEES THE **TRUE VASS.**

SOON, GOD.

SOON WHAT REMAINS OF YOU WILL BE SCRAPED OUT OF MY SUPERSTITIOUS APE BRAIN.

I'LL FINALLY BE **RID OF YOU.**

IT'S TWO DAYS BEFORE WE BEGIN TO DECELERATE.

B2

TH-THIS DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A PENAL PLANET. WHERE ARE WE?

NO QUESTIONS.

HELLO, FATHER VASS. I'M SPYMASTER MARLOV. WELCOME TO CAL IV.

C-CAL IV? BUT--

GOOD WORK, CHABAN. I'LL TAKE OVER FROM HERE.

IN THE PAST TWO WEEKS THERE HAVE BEEN A STRING OF BIZARRE AND VIOLENT INCIDENTS. MURDERS, VISIONS, NIGHTMARES.

I DON'T UNDERSTAND, WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH ME?

WHY AREN'T I ON A PENAL PLANET?

YOU SHOULD BE, OFFICIALLY. BUT I'VE USED MY INFLUENCE TO BRING YOU HERE. YOU SEE, THERE'S WHAT YOU MIGHT CALL A ***RELIGIOUS DIMENSION*** TO ALL OF THE INCIDENTS.

B-BUT THERE *IS* NO RELIGION ON CAL IV.

24

PROFESSOR CZAJKA IS AN ARCHAEOLOGIST SPECIALIZING IN LONG-DEAD ALIEN CIVILIZATIONS.

YOU STILL HAVEN'T TOLD ME WHAT THIS HAS TO DO WITH ME.

SIX DAYS AGO YOU PERFORMED AN *EXORCISM.*

IT WAS NOTHING OF THE SORT. THE GIRL WAS POISONED BY HER WORKING CONDITIONS AND--

THAT WAS YOUR *SECOND* EXORCISM, WAS IT NOT, FATHER?

YOU MEAN... NEW SATURN? TH-THAT WAS *YEARS* AGO... AND I BARELY REMEMBER A THING ABOUT IT.

UGH!

SORRY, I SHOULD HAVE WARNED YOU ABOUT THE *SMELL.*

OUR SCIENTISTS THINK ALL THE INCIDENTS ARE BEING CAUSED BY A MALIGN ALIEN INTELLIGENCE, POSSIBLY WHIPPED UP BY *CZAJKA'S* DIGGING.

62

I'M NOT SO SURE. COME AND TAKE A LOOK.

IT SEEMS CZAJKA BECAME LIKE ***THIS*** TWO DAYS BEFORE THE DEADLY INCIDENTS BEGAN.

H-HE'S... LEVITATING!

AND EVERY TIME WE TRY TO MOVE HIM, HIS ***HEART*** STOPS.

YOU'RE THE CLOSEST THING TO AN EXPERT IN EXORCISM WE HAVE, PRIEST.

SO TELL ME, IS THIS THE WORK OF AN ALIEN INTELLIGENCE... OR ***DEMONIC POSSESSION?***

MY MIND RACES BACK TO THAT POOR POISONED GIRL. AND JUST LIKE THEN--

I HAVE A VERY BAD FEELING ABOUT THIS.

M.FRUSIN
2021

THE EXORCISM BEGINS.

THE BANISHING OF EVIL SPIRITS.

THE INVOCATION OF MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL.

THE EXORCISM OF SATAN AND APOSTATE ANGELS.

AAAUGH!

F-FATHER, HER *FACE!*

NEVER MIND HER FACE. IT IS THE DEVIL'S WORK.

HAVE FAITH, VASS. *HAVE FAITH!*

I SEE IT ALL.

I REMEMBER. FIFTEEN YEARS AGO...

BEHOLD FATHER VASS. THE EXORCIST'S ASSISTANT.

HOW YOUNG HE IS. HOW FIRM IN HIS BELIEF. ORDAINED ONLY A YEAR.

WISHING FOR NOTHING MORE THAN TO SERVE HIS GOD.

HE IS SCARED. IT IS HIS FIRST EXORCISM.

FATHER, THE RESPONSE! BE A TOWER OF STRENGTH FOR HER, OH LORD...

I-IN TH-THE FACE...OF TH-THE ENEMY...

HE HAS NEVER SEEN SATAN SO CLOSE BEFORE.

NEVER SMELLED ITS SULPHUROUS BREATH.

OF **COURSE** HE'S OUT OF HIS DEPTH.

DOUBT AND FEAR WRITHE LIKE MAGGOTS THROUGH HIS BRAIN.

I CANNOT LOOK ANY LONGER. IT'S TOO PAINFUL.

AS MY EXCITED HIPPOCAMPUS THRUMS, I TURN FROM THIS DISTRESSING MEMORY...

...TO JUST A FEW HOURS AGO...

WHAT DO YOU THINK, PRIEST?

I THINK WE ARE ON AN ALIEN PLANET WHOSE PHYSICAL LAWS MAY DIFFER FROM THOSE OF EARTH--TO INCLUDE LEVITATION.

OH, I TRY SO HARD NOT TO ACCEPT WHAT I CAN SEE.

GOOD GOD... ***STIGMATA!***

SKKRRRIIIITCGH

NOW DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THIS IS SOME KIND OF POSSESSION, FATHER VASS?

OH, I DON'T DOUBT THAT HE'S ***POSSESSED.***

I JUST DON'T THINK IT HAS ANYTHING TO DO WITH ***DEMONS.***

*HOW HEAVILY HE WEARS THESE FIFTEEN YEARS. HOW CHANGED HE IS. HOW **DIMINISHED.***

YOU MEAN... THIS IS THE WORK OF AN ALIEN LIFE FORM...WITH A KNOWLEDGE OF ***CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY?***

ALL I KNOW IS...I DO NOT BELIEVE IN DEMONS OR DEVILS.

AT LEAST, NOT ***SUPERNATURAL*** ONES.

I WISH I WAS AS CONVINCED AS I TRY TO SOUND.

BUT IT SEEMS I'M EVEN **UNCERTAIN** IN MY **NON-BELIEF.**

HIS HEART IS FAILING. HIS IMMUNE SYSTEM'S BREAKING DOWN... HE'S ON THE VERGE OF IMMINENT MULTIPLE ORGAN FAILURE.

WITHOUT HELP, PROFESSOR CZAJKA WILL BE DEAD WITHIN WEEKS.

EVEN MORE REASON WHY HE NEEDS PROPER ***MEDICAL ATTENTION*** AND NOT A...A...

A WHAT, FATHER VASS?

A WASHED-OUT PRIEST WHO'S LOST HIS FAITH.

MAYBE YOU CAN REGAIN YOUR FAITH.

I DON'T WANT TO REGAIN IT! I WANT RID OF THE WHOLE DAMN THING!

MAY I REMIND YOU, YOU ONCE ASSISTED AT AN EXORCISM.

SO THEY SAY. A LONG TIME AGO. I CAN BARELY REMEMBER THE DETAILS.

YOU WILL, FATHER. YOU WILL.

WHICH BRINGS US HERE.

THE SO-CALLED **MNEMORIUM.**

YET ANOTHER SHINING EXAMPLE OF MANKIND'S SCIENTIFIC GENIUS.

THE SCIENCE OF ***MEMORY RETRIEVAL*** HAS MADE GREAT ADVANCES. NOW ANY MEMORY, HOWEVER DISTANT, HOWEVER DEEPLY BURIED, CAN BE SALVAGED.

MAYBE SOME MEMORIES ARE BEST LEFT BURIED.

OUR PSYCHOLOGISTS WOULD DISAGREE WITH YOU, FATHER VASS.

FEAR MAKES MY LEGS WEAK.

FEAR OF WHAT?

WHAT AM I SO SCARED OF FINDING OUT?

I AM SOON RIGGED UP TO THE **MEMORY RETRIEVAL APPARATUS.** (YES, THEY ACTUALLY CALL IT THAT.)

AS I WAIT FOR THE PROCESS TO BEGIN...SOMETHING UNEXPECTED HAPPENS.

I FIND MYSELF UTTERING A SILENT PRAYER.

TO WHOM? **SCIENCE?** SURELY NOT **GOD.**

AH YES. I REMEMBER THE SUDDEN SHOCK.

NOT PAIN EXACTLY.

SOMETHING MORE INSIDIOUS.

FATHER VASS, CHARGED PARTICLES ARE BEING RELEASED INTO YOUR BRAIN. THESE WILL HELP YOU TO VIVIDLY RECALL ANY MEMORY.

YOU MAY FEEL A LITTLE NAUSEOUS AT FIRST. THIS IS QUITE NORMAL.

FOCUS, FATHER. NEW SATURN, FIFTEEN YEARS AGO...

"...THE EXORCISM OF FRIDA OCHOE..."

AAAGHHUU!

WE EXORCISE YOU, EACH UNCLEAN SPIRIT...EACH POWER OF SATAN...EACH INFESTATION OF THE ENEMY FROM HELL...

FATHER VASS...WE R-REACH THE CRITICAL HOUR. YOU MUST NOT FAIL ME NOW.

THE DEVIL IS MOST DANGEROUS WHEN HE IS WOUNDED.

WE WILL RECITE THE REST OF THE ***ROMAN RITUAL*** TOGETHER.

DO NOT DARE FURTHER, MOST CUNNING SERPENT, TO DECEIVE THE HUMAN RACE...AND TO PERSECUTE THE ONE TRUE CHURCH...

...NOVICE RAIS' SOFT YOUNG NAKED BODY, VASS. OH, HOW YOU DREAM...HOW YOU LUST...

NO. HE COULD NOT HAVE SAID THAT.

*THIS IS **MANY YEARS** BEFORE I MET NOVICE RAIS.*

I FORCE MY MIND BACK TO THE PAST.

COME, FATHER! LET US LAY HANDS ON THE TORMENTED GIRL AND EXORCISE THE UNCLEAN SPIRIT!

UGH...OLD FOOL...

I WILL DRAG YOU DOWN TO HELL...

AGHH!

F-FATHER... F-FOR THE LOVE OF G-GOD... HELP ME...

BUT SOMETHING HAS BROKEN INSIDE ME.

I HEAR THE OLD PRIEST SCREAMING BUT DO NOT RESPOND.

CANNOT RESPOND.

I AM YOUNG.

THIS IS MY FIRST EXORCISM.

I KNOW THEN IT WILL BE MY LAST.

I'D SUPPRESSED THE MEMORY. AND NO WONDER...

...FATHER BLAKE DIED BECAUSE I LOST MY NERVE. ALL THIS WHEN I WAS YOUNG AND MY FAITH WAS STILL STRONG.

WHAT CHANCE WOULD I HAVE ***NOW*** AGAINST A DEMON?

SO YOU CONCEDE THERE ***ARE*** DEMONS?

I WAS USING THE TERM LOOSELY. IT WAS MORE LIKELY SOME KIND OF RELIGIOUS HYSTERIA.

YOU'RE UPSET ABOUT LETTING THE PRIEST DIE. WELL, HERE'S YOUR CHANCE FOR ***REDEMPTION.***

I THOUGHT YOU CHRISTIANS WERE ***BIG*** ON THAT KIND OF THING.

MARLOV, NOTHING YOU SAY WILL MAKE ME PERFORM AN EXORCISM ON PROFESSOR CZAJKA.

WE'LL SEE.

TAKE A LOOK AT THE SCREEN, FATHER.

YOU! PRISONER! STOP THERE!

RAIS!

THIS IS LIVE-STREAMING FROM THE PENAL PLANET WHERE YOUR NOVICE ENDED UP. IT'S A PARTICULARLY UNPLEASANT COLONY.

08:22:08

C 643
nopors derob

THE GUARDS THERE HAVE A ***REPUTATION...***

YOU WANT TO SURVIVE, YOU'VE GOT TO BE NICE.

...FOR ***ENJOYING*** THEIR WORK A LITTLE TOO MUCH...

NO! UGH!

AHH!

I'LL BREAK YOU IN, GIRL. DON'T YOU WORRY.

MARLOV, THIS IS OUTRAGEOUS. YOU HAVE TO ***DO*** SOMETHING.

I ***COULD*** ASK THEM TO MAKE HER TREATMENT EVEN ***WORSE.*** IN A MONTH, YOU WON'T ***RECOGNIZE*** HER.

HER FATE IS IN ***YOUR HANDS,*** VASS.

DO WE UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER?

OH, I UNDERSTAND.

AND I HAVE THE FEELING OF AN ASSIGNATION LONG DEFERRED.

AN AWFUL INEVITABILITY.

IF I'M TO DO THIS THING...I'LL NEED AN ASSISTANT. SOMEONE WHOSE FAITH IS GREATER THAN MINE.

WE HAVE A FEW OLD PRIESTS ROTTING IN JAIL. WE'LL BE ABLE TO FIND YOU SOMEONE.

YOU KNOW THAT'S NOT WHO I WANT.

I TAKE ANOTHER LOOK AT PROFESSOR CZAJKA.

WHAT DO I HOPE TO SEE?

THE MARK OF SATAN? ABSOLUTE EVIL?

MY OWN WEAKNESS?

I WILL NEED THE ROMAN RITUAL. SALT. CRUCIFIXES. FRESH WATER. CLEAN VESTMENTS.

YOU'LL GET EVERYTHING.

AND A FULLY-CHARGED ***TRANSUBSTANTIATOR.***

YES, I HEARD ALL ABOUT YOUR ***TRANSUB ADDICTION.***

YOU WERE RAISED AN ATHEIST, MARLOV. YOU WON'T KNOW THE ACHING CHASM THAT'S LEFT WHEN YOUR FAITH GOES.

A CHASM THAT THE TRANSUB FILLS?

SOMETIMES, YES.

VASSS...

...NOVICE RAIS' SOFT YOUNG NAKED BODY...OH, HOW YOU DREAM...HOW YOU LUST...

IT'S WHAT THE DEMON-- OR WHATEVER IT WAS--POSSESSING **FRIDA OCHOE** SAID, **FIFTEEN YEARS AGO.**

COULD THIS BE THE SAME ENTITY? NO, THAT'S INSANE.

MAYBE THE ENTITY'S USING SOME KIND OF TELEPATHY?

VASS, YOU LOOK SICK... WHAT'S WRONG?

THE D-DEMON... HE USED THE SAME W-WORDS HE USED ON NEW SATURN...

WHAT ***WORDS?*** I HEARD NOTHING BUT THE WIND.

DAMN IT, VASS. DON'T YOU GO FLAKY ON ME.

DID I IMAGINE IT? IS MY MIND DISINTEGRATING?

THREE DAYS SINCE MY LAST TRANSUBSTANTIATION.

IS THIS THE FIRST SIGN OF **WITHDRAWAL?**

PLANET SECURITY. MAKE WAY--

GOOD GRIEF, WHAT'S HAPPENING OUTSIDE--?

WHAT'S HAPPENING IS OUR SITUATION HAS JUST GOT A WHOLE LOT WORSE.

MARLOV, YOU'RE UNDER ARREST FOR HARBORING A PRIEST.

THAT'S ABSURD. AN EXORCISM WAS AUTHORIZED.

AUTHORIZATION HAS BEEN REVOKED. ***SCIENCE*** WILL CURE PROFESSOR CZAJKA.

YOU, PRIEST, ARE A RELIC OF A BYGONE AGE. A DANGER TO CIVILIZED PEOPLE.

I AGREE. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN US--IS THAT ***I*** NO LONGER BELIEVE IN MY GOD.

IT SEEMS YOU STILL HAVE BLIND FAITH IN ***YOURS.***

EVERYTHING THAT MODERN SCIENCE HAS IS THROWN AT CZAJKA AND THE ENTITY POSSESSING HIM.

TANTALUM THERAPY CONFIRMS SOMETHING IS INSIDE HIM.

SHOU SHI BEAMS TRY TO DESTROY IT.

LINGUIST PHAGEGRAMS ATTEMPT TO COMMUNICATE WITH IT.

DO ALL THESE SCIENTIFIC EFFORTS ANGER THE ENTITY?

DOES IT RESPOND BY SOMEHOW CAUSING THE UNUSUAL ELECTRICAL STORM THAT STRIKES CAL IV?

THERE'S A MOOD OF UNEASY FOREBODING.

A MOOD THAT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN FELT FOR MILLENNIA.

AND THEN THEY BEGIN.

THE TYPE OF MURDERS YOU SHOULDN'T FIND IN A MODERN RATIONALIST SOCIETY.

MANY CITIZENS HAVE NIGHTMARES.

FULL OF INEXPLICABLE CREATURES THAT BELONG TO A DIFFERENT WORLD.

642

SOME ARE DRIVEN TO PROTECT THEMSELVES IN WAYS THEY CANNOT UNDERSTAND.

I KNOW ALL THIS BECAUSE A VOICE INSIDE MY HEAD GIVES ME A **RUNNING COMMENTARY.**

THE VOICE SOUNDS LIKE YOU-KNOW-WHO.

42

BUT THAT'S SURELY AN ILLUSION.

CAUSED BY MY BRUTAL TRANSUB WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS.

CLAMMY SHAKES. BLURRED VISION.

A STRANGE HOLLOWNESS IN MY OCULOS DIO.

DIARRHEA.

OH, GOD! GOD HELP ME!

YES, THE HYPOCRITE CRIES OUT TO THE GOD HE HAS DENIED.

BUT HE SEEMS TO ANSWER ME.

AT LAST, I LOSE CONSCIOUSNESS.

I DO NOT KNOW HOW MUCH TIME PASSES.

C2

BUT WHEN I COME TO, A HUNGER HAS BEEN DIMINISHED.

YOU'RE AUTHORIZED TO PROCEED WITH THE EXORCISM.

Y-YOU MEAN...Y-YOUR SCIENCE DIDN'T CURE PROFESSOR CZAJKA?

YOU HAVE FOUR DAYS. GET IT DONE, PRIEST-- OR YOU'LL SUFFER THE ***CONSEQUENCES.***

I DON'T BELIEVE I CAN EXORCISE CZAJKA'S DEMON.

BUT I'LL BE MADE A SCAPEGOAT FOR SCIENCE'S SHORTCOMINGS IF I FAIL.

NOVICE RAIS ARRIVES THE FOLLOWING DAY.

I N-NEVER LOST FAITH, F-FATHER. IN GOD...OR IN YOU.

COME, RAIS. WE HAVE WORK TO DO.

ANYTHING, FATHER. ANYTHING TO REPAY YOUR FAITH IN ME.

*THAT WORD AGAIN. **FAITH.***

I FEAR WE'LL NEED MORE THAN THAT.

HOLY M-MOTHER-FATHER. IT IS THE EVIL ONE.

YOU'RE TO ASSIST ME IN THE EXORCISM, RAIS. BUT YOU'RE YOUNG AND INEXPERIENCED...SO I'LL UNDERSTAND IF YOU DON'T THINK YOU'RE UP TO IT--

WHEN DO WE BEGIN?

CAN A PRIEST WHO'S LOST HIS FAITH BLESS HOLY WATER? DOES THE MAGIC STILL HAPPEN?

I CONSIDER GETTING A HIT OF **SPIRITUAL OOMPH** FROM THE TRANSUB.

BUT NO.

IT WON'T **ENSLAVE** ME AGAIN QUITE SO SOON.

AND SO ANOTHER EXORCISM BEGINS. THE OLD RITUAL, THE OLD WORDS.

THE BANISHING OF EVIL SPIRITS.

THE INVOCATION OF MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL.

THE EXORCISM OF SATAN AND APOSTATE ANGELS.

MANKIND HAS ESCAPED THE CONSTRAINTS OF EARTH.

WE HAVE TRAVELED FAR INTO SPACE. WE'VE LEFT THAT BIG-BRAINED APE FAR BEHIND.

BUT IT SEEMS WE'VE STILL GOT OUR DEMONS.

M.FRUSIN
2022

EXORCISMS HAVE BEEN PERFORMED SINCE THE EARLIEST DAYS OF THE CHURCH.

BRAVE HOLY MEN RISKING THEIR IMMORTAL SOULS TO CAST OUT DEMONS AND EVIL SPIRITS.

OR MAYBE JUST **DELUDED FOOLS** TORTURING OTHER **DELUDED FOOL**S WHO WERE POSSESSED WITH NOTHING MORE DEMONIC THAN **MENTAL ILLNESS.**

AND MILLENNIA LATER AND VERY FAR FROM EARTH, I AM ONE MORE SUCH FOOL.

GOING THROUGH THE SAME ANCIENT, TIRED RITES OF **EXORCISM.**

BUT I AM NEITHER **BRAVE** NOR **HOLY.**

AND IT SEEMS I AM NOT ALONE IN MY FOOLISHNESS.

ALL OVER THE COLONY HUMANITY SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN DRAGGED BACK TO THE **DARK AGES**...

SUPERSTITION... FEAR OF WHAT LURKS IN THE DARK...

THERE'S A SUDDEN LUCRATIVE MARKET FOR **GOOD LUCK AMULETS** AND **SPELLS** TO WARD OFF EVIL...

"MANKIND TRAVELED TO THE STARS TO LEAVE THIS KIND OF NONSENSE ***BEHIND ON EARTH...***"

...BUT THIS DEMON--OR WHATEVER IT IS--IS ***AFFECTING*** PEOPLE. THEY'RE RETURNING TO ***OLD WAYS*** TO PROTECT THEMSELVES.

DO YOU THINK MAGIC SIGNS AND RITUALS OFFER PROTECTION AGAINST ***ANYTHING?***

I SHOULD WARN YOU, MARLOV. PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ***IMPRISONED*** FOR SAYING LESS.

I M-MEAN ONLY THAT... PEOPLE SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING AROUND THEM. THE RITUALISTIC MURDERS. THE COMMUNAL NIGHTMARES. THEY'RE ***SCARED.***

AND THEY SEE SCIENCE FAILING TO PROTECT THEM.

WHICH IS WHY ***PLANET SECURITY*** IS GOING TO PUT AN **END** TO THIS CHARADE.

THE PRIEST AND HIS NOVICE NEED MORE TIME!

A PRIEST WHO'S LOST HIS FAITH AND A NOVICE WHO'S LITTLE MORE THAN A CHILD?

WAS THAT REALLY THE BEST YOU COULD FIND, MARLOV?

THIS IS 2999, SO OUR TOOLS HAVE CHANGED SINCE THOSE EARLY EXORCISTS.

ALONGSIDE THE **ROMAN RITUAL** AND **HOLY WATER** THERE IS NOW THE **TRANSUBSTANTIATOR,** OR **TRANSUB.**

NONE OF IT HAS ANY EFFECT.

WE MUST CONTINUE, FATHER VASS. THE DEVIL IS WEAKENING.

RAIS...SO PURE OF FAITH. W-WELL, I'M SORRY TO TELL YOU, BUT YOUR FAITH IS ***MISPLACED***. IN GOD.

MOST OF ALL, IN ***ME.***

THAT'S THE DEMON TALKING, FATHER. HE TRIES TO ***WEAKEN*** YOU.

DON'T YOU UNDERSTAND? THERE ***IS NO DEMON.***

PRIEST!

THERE! THE DEMON SPEAKS!

A V-VOICE, RAIS. IT PROVES NOTHING.

I KNOW ABOUT YOU, PRIEST.

YOUR BROKEN VOWS OF CHASTITY. THAT WOMAN ON CETUS II. OH, HOW SHE BEGGED YOU! OH, HOW YOU SINNED!

NOW WE KNOW FOR SURE IT'S A DEMON! THIS IS PATENTLY A ***LIE***...AND THE DEVIL IS THE ***PRINCE OF LIES!***

*I DO NOT-- MAYBE I **CANNOT**--TELL RAIS THE TRUTH.*

THE SHAMEFUL TRUTH...

DO YOU LOVE ME, VASS?

Y-YES, BUT--

THEN STAY WITH ME. LEAVE THE PRIESTHOOD.

I WISH IT COULD BE SO, SWEET EIMER. B-BUT WHILE THERE ARE STILL SOME ***BELIEVERS*** LEFT... PEOPLE WHO ***NEED*** ME...I CANNOT ***ABANDON*** THEM.

FINE WORDS. BUT YOU LIED TO HER, PRIEST. THE TRUTH WAS, YOU WERE SCARED OF LOVE. OF EMOTIONS. OF LIFE ITSELF.

YOU HID BEHIND YOUR CURSED COLLAR!

T-TRUE. ALL T-TRUE...

FATHER!

THOUGH PAINFULLY ACCURATE, THIS PROVES NO DEMONIC POSSESSION.

THE UNIVERSE HAS MANY ALIEN ENTITIES WITH ***TELEPATHIC ABILITIES.***

I...*UHH*... I CANNOT GO ON...

HAVE FAITH, FATHER...

LET THE HOLY SPIRIT STRENGTHEN YOU...

I FEAR I'M TOO OLD FOR THIS. TOO OLD AND TOO WEAK...

THEN STAND ASIDE, *TRANSUB PRIEST*...

PROFESSOR CZAJKA AND THE *THING* THAT NESTS INSIDE HIM WILL BE *INCINERATED* AND HIS ASHES BLASTED DEEP INTO SPACE.

A NECESSARY SACRIFICE.

THAT'S MURDER!

AND WHAT CHANCE DO *YOU* HAVE OF SOLVING THE PROBLEM?

CITIZEN MARLOV TOLD ME YOU DON'T EVEN *BELIEVE* IN DEMONS.

MAYBE... THE THING POSSESSING CZAJKA *DOES.*

AND MAYBE THAT'S *ENOUGH.*

A TYPICAL SPECIOUS *PRIESTLY ARGUMENT.*

GO AHEAD, BOYS.

LEAVE ME DAMN WELL ALONE.

PULL, KENNI, *PULL!*

UGH! CIRCUM... C-CAPUT MEUM... C-CIRCUM CAPUT MEUM...

H-HE'S SPEAKING L-LATIN. *CAPUT MEUM... CIRCUM... CIRCUM...*

TH-THAT MEANS...

"...OH MY GOD...

UGH!

KRRK!

"TURN MY HEAD AROUND."

AGGHH!

KRRK!

CITIZEN RELISH? WH-WHAT NOW?

TH-THE PRIEST HAS T-THREE MORE DAYS.

AFTER THAT I'M DROPPING AN ***ISOTOPE DEVICE*** AND OBLITERATING ***EVERYTHING***, CZAJKA, PRIEST, AND ANYONE ELSE FOOLISH ENOUGH TO BE HERE.

*RAIS SAYS THE REQUISITE **ANCIENT WORDS** OVER THEIR BROKEN BODIES.*

AS FOR ME...

ANY IDEAS THAT I MIGHT WIN THIS BATTLE HAVE VANISHED.

THERE'S NO TIME TO SPARE, FATHER. WE NEED MORE HOLY WATER. I HAVE MIXED THE WATER AND SALT, IT AWAITS YOUR BLESSING.

PERHAPS WE SHOULD PRAY FIRST AND THEN CONTINUE WITH--

FATHER? WHAT IS IT?

YOU SAW WHAT IT DID TO THOSE MEN. AREN'T YOU AFRAID THE SAME THING WILL HAPPEN TO YOU?

THOSE POOR SOULS DIDN'T HAVE OUR FAITH, FATHER.

IF ONLY...IT WERE THAT SIMPLE...

FATHER, IF YOU'RE WEARY... MAYBE ***I*** SHOULD ATTACK THE DEMON.

I AM YOUNGER. MAYBE MY FAITH IS FRESHER...EVEN ***STRONGER.***

NO... IT'S TOO DANGEROUS. I ***FORBID*** IT, RAIS.

DO YOU NOT HAVE FAITH IN ME, FATHER?

YOU'RE ABOUT THE ONLY THING I ***DO*** HAVE FAITH IN. BUT IT'S ***MY*** RESPONSIBILITY TO RID CZAJKA OF WHATEVER'S POSSESSING HIM.

I JUST NEED TO REST A WHILE. WAKE ME IN FIFTEEN MINUTES...AND WE'LL RESUME THE FIGHT.

VERY WELL. I'LL PRAY TO GOD TO GIVE YOU STRENGTH.

HOLY MOTHER-FATHER... GIVE YOUR SON THE STRENGTH HE NEEDS...

YOU CAN PRAY ALL YOU LIKE. I'LL WEAR HIM DOWN AND DESTROY HIM. I'LL FIND HIS WEAKNESSES.

AFTER ALL, HE HAS SO MANY.

Y-YOU ARE WRONG, F-FOUL DEMON. THE FATHER IS A FINE, PIOUS MAN.

AND WHAT OF YOU, NOVICE? YOU SAY YOUR FAITH IS STRONG. BUT DARE YOU TEST IT?

HAVE YOU FAITH IN YOURSELF?

THEN PROVE IT!

UGHH... WHUU?

OF C-COURSE I DO...

THE FATHER FORBIDS ME TO FIGHT YOU, OR I W-WOULD.

LIAR! YOU FEAR THAT YOUR FAITH IS TOO WEAK!

YOU'RE SCARED YOU'RE JUST A SILLY LITTLE GIRL WITH A VERY UNPIOUS CRUSH ON THE FATHER.

THAT'S NOT TRUE!

GOD HELP ME CAST OUT THIS *UNCLEAN SPIRIT!*

...RAIS?

RAIS, IN GOD'S NAME NO!

RAIS!

AAAIGHH!

UGN!

SMKK!

IF SHE DIES, IT WILL BE MY FAULT, ANOTHER SHAMEFUL ACT TO ADD TO ALL THE OTHERS.

MED BAY

MAYBE I THOUGHT HER YOUNG FAITH WOULD HELP ME. MAYBE MY REASONS FOR BRINGING HER HERE WERE MORE REPREHENSIBLE.

EITHER WAY, IT ENDS NOW.

21

I'M S-SORRY, FATHER, I DISOBEYED YOU...

RAIS, IT WOULD BE BETTER IF I HAD A MORE EXPERIENCED PRIEST AS MY ASSISTANT.

B-BUT I GOT UNDER ITS SKIN. YOU CAN'T REPLACE ME NOW.

YOU'RE JUST A NOVICE. I NEED A *PRIEST.*

THEN *ORDAIN ME!*

IMPOSSIBLE! Y-YOU'RE NOT READY!

MAYBE THE HOLY WATER IS INEFFECTIVE BECAUSE YOU LACK THE FAITH TO PROPERLY BLESS IT.

ORDAIN ME AND *I'LL* BLESS IT!

ORDAIN ME AND WE'LL DEFEAT THIS DEMON *TOGETHER.*

DO AS SHE ASKS, VASS. IT MIGHT HELP.

MARLOV, STAY OUT OF THIS.

UNLESS THERE'S PROGRESS, YOU'LL ALL BE OBLITERATED BY RELISH'S *ISOTOPE BOMB.*

THERE ARE OBLIGATIONS, PREPARATIONS. SHE'S NOT READY.

DOES SHE BELIEVE IN YOUR GOD?

YES...YES, SHE DOES.

THEN MAYBE SHE'LL MAKE A BETTER PRIEST THAN *YOU.*

CHALICE. WINE. CANDLES. EUCHARIST.

THE OLD RITUAL.

I AM IN A KIND OF TRANCE.

...SISTER, DO YOU RESOLVE TO CELEBRATE THE MYSTERIES OF THE SACRAMENT...?

I DO...

THE SACRED WORDS OF ORDINATION SPILL EFFORTLESSLY FROM ME.

EVEN NOW, EVEN AFTER ALL I HAVE LOST, I FIND THE CEREMONY DEEPLY MOVING.

RAIS HAS NEVER LOOKED MORE BEAUTIFUL, RADIANT WITH RELIGIOUS FERVOR...

NO, THIS IS WRONG. THIS IS UNWORTHY.

TO IMAGINE THIS, AT SUCH AN OCCASION.

EVEN SOMEONE WHO'S SUNK AS LOW AS I HAVE...CANNOT ALLOW SUCH A VILE FANTASY TO CONTINUE...

BUT IT IS NO FANTASY...

FATHER...

R-RAIS... N-NO...YOU MUST NOT DO THIS...

I HAVE SEEN THE WAY YOU LOOK AT ME, FATHER.

N-NO, I MEAN, I SHOULD NOT HAVE...I WAS WEAK, I--

I KNOW YOU WANT ME. OH, YOU WANT ME SO BADLY.

NOW, FATHER. NOW.

THIS IS SO WRONG.

I KNOW THIS IS SO WRONG.

BUT AM I TEMPTED?

DO NOT DOUBT IT.

YES, I IMAGINE HOW IT WILL BE.

HER SOFT FLESH. OUR CRIES OF UNION.

AND I WANT THIS.

SWEET GOD, I WANT THIS.

BUT SOME PART OF ME THAT ISN'T YET ENTIRELY DEFILED PULLS BACK.

RAIS. STOP THIS.

I AM YOURS, PRIEST. TAKE ME.

TAKE ME, PRIEST...

HER EYES ARE NO LONGER RAIS' EYES.

RAIS, LISTEN TO ME. YOU D-DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING.

STOP.

WE HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS, PRIEST.

I *KNOW* YOU. KNOW HOW *WEAK* YOU ARE. YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO RESIST THIS RIPE FEMALE BODY.

LEAVE HER, DEMON!

DEMON.

I CALLED IT DEMON.

FOR SURELY ONLY SOMETHING OF PURE **INTELLIGENT EVIL** COULD BE DOING THIS.

I BEGIN TO SEE WHAT THIS **MEANS.**

I WANT TO PUSH THE THOUGHT AWAY. WANT TO STAY IN DARKNESS. TO REMAIN AN UNBELIEVER.

BUT I HEAR MYSELF SAYING:

IN THE NAME OF GOD, LEAVE THIS INNOCENT!

UGH!

UHHH...

RAIS!

YES, I CALLED IT **DEMON.** AND I BELIEVE I HAVE MET THIS DEMON BEFORE.

AAGHHHH!!

ON AN INDUSTRIAL PLANET WHERE THE AIR BURNED THE THROAT AND LUNGS WITH THE TANG OF SWEET CORROSIVE SEWAGE.

THE SAME DEMON THAT POSSESSED FRIDA OCHOE AND KILLED OLD FATHER BLAKE.

A DEMON WHO ALMOST COST ME MY FAITH **AND** MY MIND.

BUT WHAT IS A DEMON IF NOT BUT ONE ASPECT OF THE **EVIL ONE?**

THE **DEVIL.**

AND, WHERE THERE IS THE DEVIL...

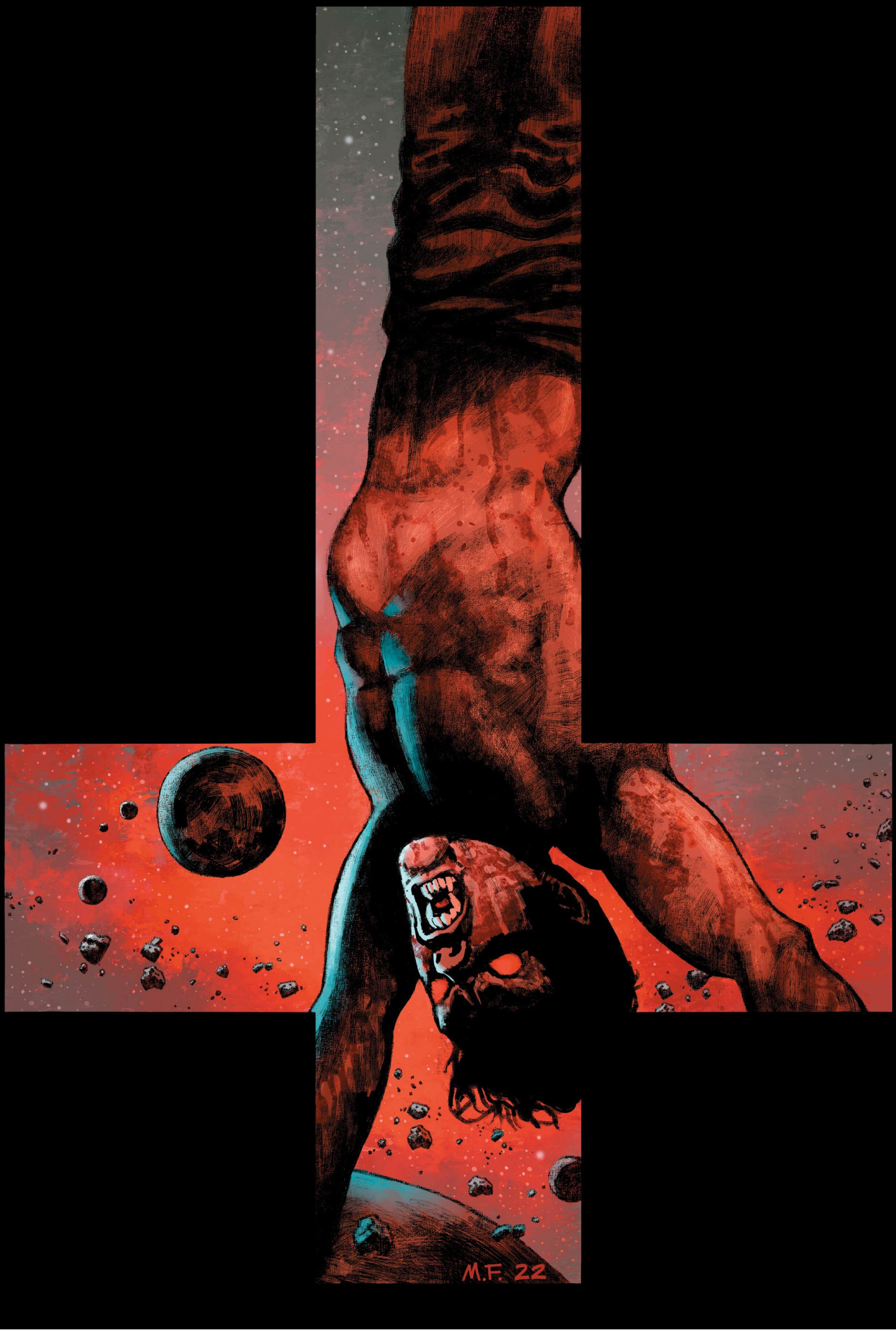
...IS THERE NOT A GOD?

R-RAIS... P-PLEASE... YOU CAN'T DIE.

AND THEN I DO SOMETHING I HAVE NOT DONE FOR SOME TIME.

SAVE HER, LORD. IF Y-YOU INDEED EXIST...PLEASE... SAVE HER...

I JUST HOPE I'M NOT TOO OUT OF PRACTICE.


M.F. 22

AND SO I PRAY FOR THE LIFE AND MORTAL SOUL OF NOVICE RAIS.

SLOWLY--LIKE BABIES RELUCTANT TO BE BORN-- THE WORDS COME...

THE PSALMS. THE NAZARENE.

THE GREGORIAN SACRAMENTS.

THE PRAYERS OF **SAINT PADRE PIO.**

I CALL UPON ARCHANGEL RAPHAEL, THE ANGEL OF HEALING.

I USE SACRED WORDS THAT I THOUGHT I'D FORGOTTEN.

THAT I TRIED SO HARD TO FORGET.

BUT, IT SEEMS, HAVE NOT ENTIRELY FORGOTTEN ME...

UHH... HHHH

VASS, YOU MUST TAKE A BREAK. YOU'VE BEEN PRAYING FOR ***TWELVE HOURS*** STRAIGHT. YOU'RE NO GOOD TO ANY OF US IF YOU KILL YOURSELF.

WAIT.

UHH... HHHH

W-WEAK... NOT BE A-ABLE TO...R-RESIST... M-MUST... R-RESIST...

...RIPE...HUMAN BODY...MY RIPE HUMAN BODY...

HER FACE! WH-WHAT'S HAPPENING TO HER FACE?

I THINK... I THINK IT IS THE ***DEVIL'S SICKNESS...***

H-HELP... HELP...ME...

DEAR GOD, RID YOUR CHILD OF SATAN'S POISON...

AAUGHHH!

GOOD GRIEF!

HER BILE! IT STINGS! IT B-BURNS!

HOLD YOUR NERVE, MARLOV. IT WILL NOT KILL YOU.

FATHER YASS...

...I REMEMBER.

I REMEMBER EVERYTHING.

I H-HAD NO CONTROL OVER MY BODY. BUT...BUT I COULD SEE WHAT WAS ***HAPPENING.***

RAIS, LISTEN--

THE DEVIL ***OFFERED*** ME TO YOU. AND YOU ***WANTED*** ME*!*

OH FATHER, I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOOD. I THOUGHT YOU WERE ***HOLY***. BUT ALL THE TIME...ALL THE TIME YOU ***LUSTED*** AFTER ME.

LET ME EXPLAIN...

EXPLAIN HOW YOU WANTED TO DEBAUCH ME? NO*!* STAY AWAY FROM ME*!* YOU'RE DISGUSTING. ***I HATE YOU.***

IT IS TRUE, I WAS TEMPTED. BUT I DIDN'T TOUCH YOU...

BUT YOU ***WANTED*** TO*!* I FELT THE HEAT OF YOUR ***LUST.***

MISTER MARLOV, I WANT TO BE TAKEN BACK TO THE PENAL PLANET.

GO BACK THERE AND THEY'LL ***REMOVE YOUR GOD LOCUS.***

GOOD*!* LET THEM RIP OUT MY BELIEF IN GOD. YOU HAVE SHOWN ME WHAT A ***LIE*** IT IS.

IS THIS HOW IT WORKS, THEN? I REGAIN MY FAITH...

...BUT AT THE COST OF **RAIS' FAITH?**

IF IT MAKES YOU FEEL ANY BETTER, I DON'T BLAME YOU FOR LUSTING AFTER HER. I--

BHAFF

AAGHH!

NO, MARLOV. IT DOES NOT... MAKE ME FEEL ANY BETTER.

UHNN...NGGG... DAMN. Y-YOU SHOULD SAVE YOUR ***STRENGTH***. HOW ARE YOU GOING TO DEFEAT THE DEMON NOW THAT YOU'RE ***ALONE?***

SO...YOU BELIEVE IT ***IS*** A DEMON?

I...I AM NOT SURE ***WHAT*** TO BELIEVE.

SPYMASTER MARLOV...WE'LL MAKE A CHRISTIAN OUT OF YOU YET.

03:22:00

THIS IS A COMPUTER-GENERATED IMAGE OF WHAT THE ISOTOPE MISSILE WILL DO TO THE SITE.

03:22:08

03:22:20

AS YOU SEE, IT'S NOTHING IF NOT THOROUGH...

THE *ISOTOPE MISSILE* WILL VAPORIZE ANYTHING UNLUCKY ENOUGH TO BE WITHIN A QUARTER OF A MILE OF THE SITE.

THAT PLACE MIGHT REVEAL THE SECRETS OF AN *ANCIENT ALIEN RACE.*

THEN THEY'LL *REMAIN* SECRET.

RELISH, LISTEN...THE PRIEST HAS GOT HIS *FAITH* BACK. I REALLY THINK HE HAS A CHANCE OF DEFEATING THE THING THAT'S POSSESSING CZAJKA.

EVEN MORE REASON TO OBLITERATE HIM.

I D-DON'T UNDERSTAND...

MANKIND HAD RELIGION FOR MILLENNIA...AND WHAT WAS THE RESULT?

WARS, PERSECUTIONS, MASSACRES...THE MOST GROTESQUE TORTURES THE HUMAN MIND COULD CONCEIVE.

RELIGION WAS A BLOODY MILLSTONE AROUND HUMANITY'S NECK, STUNTING AND PERVERTING OUR EVOLUTION. BY HEADING FOR THE STARS WE HAVE TRIED TO PUT ALL THAT *BEHIND* US.

NOW, IF I ALLOWED THE PRIEST TO EXORCISE A DEMON, HOW WOULD THE POPULACE REACT?

THERE'D BE PRAYERS OF THANKS. A RESURGENCE OF BELIEF. A REKINDLING OF OLD BELIEFS WE'VE WORKED SO HARD TO LEAVE BEHIND ON EARTH.

YOU ASKED ME TO FIND A PRIEST...SO HE COULD FAIL?

AND DAMAGE YOUR OWN REPUTATION, SPYMASTER. WE IN *PLANET SECURITY* HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR A CHANCE TO TAKE YOU DOWN A PEG OR TWO.

AND WHAT OF CZAJKA AND THE DEMON?

THEY BOTH DIE, AS SOON AS THE ISOTOPE IS PRIMED.

PLANET SECURITY WILL BE THE HEROES OF THE DAY. THE SAVIORS OF THE COLONY.

GO HOME, MARLOV. YOU'VE SERVED YOUR PURPOSE.

YOU FORGET, RELISH. I'M ***SPYMASTER***. AND I'VE MADE IT MY BUSINESS TO KNOW ABOUT YOU. I'VE ALSO MADE SURE I HAVE A LITTLE INSURANCE.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT.

A PENCHANT FOR UNDER-AGED PROSTITUTES. AND YOU LIKE TO PLAY ROUGH. I HAVE REPORTS OF HOSPITAL ADMISSIONS, BODIES DISPOSED OF.

Y-YOU CAN'T PROVE THAT.

AND YOU CANNOT TAKE THE RISK THAT I CAN.

HOLD OFF ON YOUR ISOTOPE MISSILE. WE GIVE THE PRIEST A LITTLE MORE TIME...

IT SEEMS I HAVE REGAINED MY FAITH...

...NOW I MUST PRAY THAT FAITH IS STRONG ENOUGH FOR WHAT I MUST DO.

I BLESS THE WEAPONS OF THE EXORCIST AGAIN. HOLY WATER. CANDLES. BIBLE.

AND I TRY TO IGNORE THAT CREATURE'S INHUMAN VOICE.

YOU'RE TRYING TO CONVINCE YOURSELF YOU HAVE YOUR FAITH BACK, PRIEST. BUT I CAN SMELL YOUR LONGING.

YOU HUNGER FOR THAT INSTANT SPIRITUAL BOOST...YOU ACHE FOR THE WARM EMBRACE OF THE TRANSUB...

YOUR WORDS CANNOT BEND MY WILL, DEMON.

I HAVE RE-FOUND GOD. WHAT NEED HAVE I OF THE TRANSUB'S CHEAP PLEASURE?

FINE WORDS, FATHER. BUT I AM THE PRINCE OF LIES...AND I CAN SMELL WHEN SOMEONE'S DECEIVING THEMSELVES...

ENOUGH, DEMON!

NONE OF YOUR SILLY TOYS TOUCH ME, HOLY MAN.

IN THE NAME OF GOD--

--LEAVE THIS BODY!

AAGHHH!

I CHANT THE ANCIENT WORDS I LEARNED FROM **FATHER BLAKE** ALL THOSE YEARS AGO.

LIGHN... N-NNO...

I DRIVE YOU FROM HERE, UNCLEAN SPIRIT!

AND THEN I SENSE A CHANGE IN THE ROOM.

A SHIFT IN AIR PRESSURE...

...A KIND OF SPIRITUAL **LURCH.**

TH-THAT'S HURTING ME! P-PLEASE STOP...

CZAJKA? IS THAT YOU?

Y-YES... I...I AM PROFESSOR CZAJKA. HEAD OF THE CAL IV CENTER OF ARCHAEOLOGY.

WH-WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHERE AM I?

NO, NO, NO! YOU CANNOT HAVE HIM, PRIEST.

THIS MORTAL HUMAN IS MINE.

I SAW HIM.

*IT WAS ONLY FOR A MOMENT, BUT HE WAS **THERE.***

PROFESSOR CZAJKA.

IF I AM TO SAVE THIS MAN, I NEED TO KNOW MORE ABOUT HIM.

WHO WAS HE?

*WHY DID THE DEMON ATTACH ITSELF TO **HIM** AND NOT SOMEONE ELSE?*

THE MOMENT I SEE CZAJKA'S LODGINGS I SENSE IT.

BUT HAS MY **PRIESTLY INSTINCT** DISCERNED SOMETHING EVIL...

...OR SIMPLY THE FUNK OF A MAN WHO LIVES ONLY FOR HIS WORK AND RARELY WASHES HIS UNDERCLOTHES?

CZAJKA IS-- OR WAS--AN ARCHAEOLOGIST.

I GET NOTHING FROM THESE DISINTERRED ARTIFACTS.

BUT HIS **NOTEBOOKS--**

NOW I TOO MUST DIG.

DIG FOR THE **TRUTH.**

THEY SEEM AS DEAD AS WHATEVER ALIEN CULTURE MADE THEM.

THEY'RE ANOTHER MATTER ALTOGETHER.

ABOUT TWO WEEKS AGO HIS HANDWRITING STARTS TO BECOME **RAGGED.**

HE WRITES EXCITEDLY OF AN **IMPORTANT FIND.**

THE WRITING BECOMES INCREASINGLY ILLEGIBLE BUT IT'S CLEAR HE SOON THINKS OF NOTHING BUT THIS DISCOVERY.

HE WAS, IN HIS OWN WAY, POSSESSED. OR AT LEAST, UNHEALTHILY OBSESSED.

IT TAKES ME AN HOUR TO FIND IT.

AT FIRST, DISAPPOINTMENT. JUST ANOTHER DEAD RELIC.

THEN I HOLD IT. MY GOD, I HOLD IT.

AND I FEEL ITS **RAW POWER.** NO, I DON'T BELIEVE THIS ANCIENT THING IS A DEMON.

BUT DID IT LET A DEMON **IN?**

I TURN TO DISCUSS MY DISCOVERY WITH RAIS.

BUT OF COURSE--

RAIS IS NO LONGER WITH ME...

THOSE POOR SOULS HAVE ALREADY HAD ***THEIR GOD LOCI*** BURNED OUT.

THEY LOOK IN SO MUCH PAIN.

351

THE WORST KIND. ***SPIRITUAL*** PAIN.

OUR PERSECUTORS WON'T STOP UNTIL THEY'VE BURNED THE LORD OUT OF US ALL!

ALL RIGHT, WHICH OF YOU WHINING BASTARDS IS NEXT?

YOU, FATTY.

P-PLEASE...I BEG YOU. FIND IT IN YOUR HEART TO SPARE ME. MY F-FAITH IS ALL I HAVE.

UGH, YOU DAMNED PEOPLE MAKE ME WANT TO VOMIT.

TAKE ME.

KKRRKK

W-WILL IT HURT?

WELL, PEOPLE SAY IT'S LIKE HAVING A CORKSCREW RAMMED INTO YOUR BRAIN. AND I GUESS THERE'S NO WAY ***THAT'S*** NOT GOING TO HURT.

YOU'LL BE DIZZY AND NAUSEOUS FOR A FEW DAYS. MAYBE HAVE A FEW HALLUCINATIONS. AND THEN--

AND THEN--?

C24

C5

AND THEN NOTHING!

YOU'LL BE ALONE IN THE UNIVERSE. NO GOD. NO BELIEF. JUST YOU.

IT'S PERFECTLY OKAY IF YOU WANT TO SCREAM AT THIS POINT.

BEFORE RECOMMENCING BATTLE I DECIDE TO REST FOR A FEW MINUTES.

I END UP SLEEPING FOR NINE HOURS.

AND THEN THE FIGHT CONTINUES.

REMEMBER *THIS*, DEMON?

HOW COULD I? IT'S ANCIENT, BURIED LONG BEFORE I FOLLOWED YOU HUMANS HERE.

YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE CREATED IT--BUT MAYBE IT WAS THE MEANS BY WHICH YOU ENTERED CZAJKA. IT INDUCED OBSESSION, AVARICE, A KIND OF LUST.

AND I THINK YOU LEFT A LITTLE PIECE OF YOURSELF ***BEHIND*** IN IT!

KRSSH

UGHNN! D-DAMN YOU TO HELL... P-PRIEST...

NOW. I MUST STRIKE WHILE IT'S HURT.

DEPART, UNCLEAN SPIRIT! BE GONE, WORK OF SATAN! THE POWER OF THE CHRIST COMPELS YOU!

AAGGGHHH!

YOU THINK IT'S THAT EASY, PRIEST? YOU SNAP YOUR FINGERS AND YOU GET YOUR FAITH BACK?

I W-WILL NOT LISTEN TO THE WORDS OF THE EVIL ONE!

OH, YOU'RE TRYING SO HARD TO CONVINCE YOURSELF. BUT WE BOTH SEE THE CRACKS IN YOUR REDISCOVERED FAITH, DON'T WE?

CRACKS THAT GET WIDER...THE MORE YOU ALLOW YOURSELF TO THINK ABOUT IT...

YOU ARE WRONG. I BELIEVE!

YOU ARE STILL THE PATHETIC COWARD WHO CRINGED IN FRIGHT WHILE I KILLED FATHER BLAKE!

STILL THAT QUITTER WHO DIDN'T TRY HARDER TO SAVE THE GIRL ON THE POISONED PLANET.

N-NO... NO...NO!

TOO MUCH OF A COWARD TO LOOK AFTER THE CHILD THAT ONE OF YOUR WHORES BORE YOU...

ASHAMED MY ASS!

TH-THAT IS S-SOMETHING... F-FOR WHICH I AM ASHAMED...

AND NOW LET US DISCUSS RAIS. PURE, DEVOUT NOVICE RAIS...

G-GET THEE B-BEHIND ME, SATAN!

THE POOR, INNOCENT GIRL--ROTTING ON THAT PENAL PLANET, HER BRAIN TORN OPEN, HER SPIRIT BROKEN.

OH, FATHER, I THOUGHT YOU WERE GOOD! I THOUGHT YOU WERE HOLY!

IT ISN'T REAL. DO NOT BE FOOLED.

DO NOT LOSE YOUR COMPOSURE.

SHUT YOUR EVIL MOUTH!

YOU CALL ME EVIL. AT LEAST I'M NOT A HYPOCRITE.

YOUR FAITH IS BUILT ON SHIT. YOUR BELIEF, A TOWER OF DUNG.

GNNGNNN...

YOU ARE NOTHING!

AAAGHH!

UGGNN!

UHHH...

UHHNNN...

FATHER VASS?

UHH...?

YOU LOOK AS THOUGH YOU COULD DO WITH SOME HELP.
R-RAIS...?

M.F.
22

Ten Hours Earlier...

W-WAIT... WAIT...I'VE CHANGED MY MIND.

YOU'VE CHANGED YOUR MIND?

I N-NO LONGER WISH TO HAVE GOD CUT OUT OF ME.

I WAS ANGRY AND HURT. TRYING TO PUNISH MYSELF. BUT MY FAITH IS ALL I HAVE. T-TAKE IT...AND I'LL HAVE NOTHING.

BUT THERE *IS* NOTHING. NO GOD, NO GREAT DESIGN. AN EMPTY UNIVERSE DEVOID OF ALL MEANING.

GNGNGNGNGN

MERCIFUL GOD...SPARE ME THIS AND I WILL BE YOUR FAITHFUL SERVANT.

KUKK KUKK KUKK

DAMN IT! WHAT'S UP WITH THIS DAMNED DRILL?

A MIRACLE?

OH YES, SHE BELIEVED IT WAS A MIRACLE.

AND MAYBE IT WAS.

I'VE TURNED OFF THE POWER. NOW UNSTRAP HER FROM THAT CHAIR.

WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?

I AM SPYMASTER MARLOV. AM I GOING TO HAVE ANY TROUBLE WITH YOU?

TROUBLE? N-NOT FROM ME, SIR. A S-SPYMASTER! SUCH A GREAT HONOR!

JUST GET A FUCKING MOVE ON.

THERE'S AN ***EXPRESS CLIPPER*** WAITING. IT'LL GET US TO CAL IV IN TEN HOURS. FATHER VASS NEEDS YOU.

THAT PRIEST...DOESN'T NEED ME. HE NEEDS GOD.

THEN BE AN ***INSTRUMENT*** OF GOD.

MARLOV HADN'T BECOME SPYMASTER WITHOUT AN ASTUTE UNDERSTANDING OF PSYCHOLOGY.

BE AN INSTRUMENT OF GOD?

HOW COULD SHE REFUSE?

R-RAIS! MY GOD...H-HOW... HOW CAN YOU BE HERE?

I'LL EXPLAIN EVERYTHING LATER.

FIRST, YOU MUST FINISH MY ***ORDINATION.*** IT WILL TAKE ***TWO PRIESTS*** TO DRIVE THIS DEMON OUT.

YOU'VE HAD A LONG JOURNEY, RAIS. REST FIRST.

THE DEVIL DOES NOT REST...AND NOR SHOULD WE. WE FINISH THE ORDINATION RIGHT AWAY.

THIS TIME YOU WILL FUCK THAT PRIME PIECE OF MEAT, YASS. HER HARD NIPPLES IN YOUR DEVOUT MOUTH.

SHUT YOUR FILTHY MOUTH, YOU EVIL BASTARD!

I MET AN OLD PRIEST ON THE PENAL PLANET. HE TOLD ME THAT WHEN FIGHTING A DEMON...ONE SHOULD NEVER LOSE ONE'S TEMPER.

Y-YES... YES, YOU'RE RIGHT... FORGIVE ME...

SO I PERFORM THE OLD CEREMONY AGAIN.

THE CHALICE, THE WINE, THE EUCHARIST.

...LET US PRAY THAT ALL-POWERFUL MOTHER-FATHER...WILL GIVE THE GIFTS OF HEAVEN TO THIS SERVANT, WHOM THEY HAVE CHOSEN FOR THE OFFICE OF PRIEST...

GO TO HIM, RAIS. HE WANTS YOU. YOU WANT HIM TOO. OH, THE HEAT YOUR TWO BODIES WILL MAKE!

UGH...N-NO... GET...GET B-BEHIND ME...

RAIS... DO YOU WISH TO CONTINUE?

I...*UGH*... I AM F-FINE. I'LL NOT BE THE DEVIL'S PLAYTHING AGAIN.

PLEASE, FATHER. CARRY ON.

AND SO THE RITE CONTINUES.

UNTIL THERE ARE **TWO PRIESTS** FACING THE DEMON.

WE NEED AN UP-TO-DATE MEDICAL REPORT. I WANT TO KNOW HOW STRONG PROFESSOR CZAJKA IS BEFORE WE GO INTO BATTLE AGAIN.

THE LAST DOCTOR WHO TRIED TO EXAMINE HIM WENT INSANE. THE ONE BEFORE THAT SLIT HIS OWN THROAT.

SO GET HOLD OF A ROBOTIC MEDIC.

REVEREND RAIS... SO-CALLED PRIEST. COME...COME CLOSER...

I SHALL TELL YOU HOW TO EXPEL ME FROM THIS HUMAN'S BODY.

CLOSER... YES...CLOSER...

UGH!

THIS BODY IS ALMOST WORN OUT. I SHALL HAVE YOU INSTEAD, PRIEST. SO HOLY. SO READY FOR DEFILEMENT.

RAIS!

S-STAY BACK... FATHER.

I BELIEVE THIS IS BETWEEN ME AND THE DEVIL.

IN THE NAME OF ***JESUS***, UNHAND ME, ANCIENT SERPENT.

I SHALL FIND YOUR WEAKNESS. YES...HERE...I BELIEVE YOU WANTED HANDSOME FATHER YASS TO VIOLATE YOU. HAH! NOT SO VERY INNOCENT!

IN THE NAME OF ***GOD***, UNHAND ME, PROFLIGATE DRAGON.

UGH... SHALL FIND CRACKS IN YOUR...YOUR SHITTY FAITH...

IN THE NAME OF ***MICHAEL THE ARCHANGEL***, UNHAND ME, FOUL BEAST.

D-DAMN YOU...TO HELL...

YOU SHALL BE MINE!

RAIS... THAT WAS INCREDIBLE.

INCREDIBLE? NO, IT WAS SIMPLY A MATTER OF...

UGH!

YOU'VE BEEN GIVEN ***NANOTINS*** TO KILL THE INFECTION. AT LEAST, THEY ***THINK*** IT'S AN INFECTION...

C2

45

WHAT WERE YOU THINKING ANYWAY, TAKING ON THAT THING ON YOUR OWN?

I'VE STAKED MY ***ENTIRE REPUTATION*** ON YOU TWO. PLEASE DON'T MAKE A FOOL OF ME.

IF WE EXORCISE THE DEMON FROM THAT POOR MAN, IT WILL NOT BE TO FURTHER YOUR ***REPUTATION***, SPYMASTER.

I DIDN'T SAY...

GO AWAY, MARLOV. FATHER VASS AND I HAVE IMPORTANT MATTERS TO DISCUSS.

SPIRITUAL MATTERS.

I COULD HAVE LEFT YOU TO ROT ON THAT STINKING PENAL PLANET, WITH YOUR GOD SPOT DRILLED OUT!

YOU WERE MOVED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT, MARLOV.

HOLY SPIRIT? ME? NEVER HEARD ANYTHING SO RIDICULOUS.

WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT, FATHER VASS?

YOU'VE... *CHANGED.*

YOU MEAN, I AM NO LONGER THAT NAIVE YOUNG GIRL, HANGING ON YOUR EVERY WORD? A GIRL WHO WOULD HAVE FOLLOWED YOU TO THE END OF THE *UNIVERSE* IF YOU'D ASKED.

YES, I HAVE CHANGED. THAT GIRL IS NO MORE.

I AM...SO SORRY.

FOR WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU SORRY?

SORRY THAT I LET THE DEVIL INTO MY HEART. THAT I ALLOWED THE DEVIL TO TWIST AND CORRUPT ME.

WAS IT THE *DEVIL* WHO LUSTED AFTER ME? WAS IT THE DEVIL THAT MADE YOU SUCH A...A DISAPPOINTMENT TO ME?

I... I...

I SUGGEST YOU PRAY, FATHER VASS.

AND I SUGGEST YOU ARE HONEST WITH YOURSELF *AND* GOD.

OH, I TRY.

I TRY TO BE HONEST.

I PRAY FOR HOURS.

STAND BEFORE GOD AND ASK TO BE GIVEN STRENGTH AND WISDOM TO LOOK INTO MY HEART.

AND BE TRUTHFUL ABOUT WHAT I FIND THERE.

FATHER VASS?

UGH... MARLOV?

I MUST ADMIT, I HAD MY DOUBTS. I REALLY WASN'T SURE ABOUT YOU. BUT MY GOD, MY GOD...

YOU'RE NOT MAKING SENSE. WHAT'S HAPPENED?

RELISH WILL BE SO ***PISSED OFF!*** *HAH HAH HAH!*

MARLOV, WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU?

THERE'S SOMETHING YOU'VE GOT TO SEE.

IT'S WEIRD...BUT I CAN'T REALLY REMEMBER...A THING. EXCEPT THE HEAT. OH, I WAS BOILING UP.

PROFESSOR CZAJKA?

TAKE IT EASY WITH HIM, FATHER. HE'S SUFFERED SEVERE ORGAN DAMAGE. HE'S LUCKY TO BE ALIVE.

AH, THE PRIEST I'VE BEEN HEARING SO MUCH ABOUT.

TELL ME, IS IT TRUE? WAS I POSSESSED BY SOME KIND OF... DEMON?

THE DEVIL IS A DUPLICITOUS SERPENT. HE COULD BE *HIDING.*

DEMON...IF YOU RESIDE WITHIN THIS MAN...I ORDER YOU IN THE NAME OF GOD TO REVEAL YOURSELF...

UH...AM I SUPPOSED TO *FEEL* SOMETHING?

SHOW YOURSELF DEMON! SHOW YOURSELF!

THIS IS STARTING TO PISS ME OFF.

THAT'S ENOUGH, FATHER. HE NEEDS TO REST.

THERE'S NO DEMON THERE, VASS. IT'S GONE.

HAS REVEREND RAIS SEEN THIS?

I TRIED CALLING HER, SHE ISN'T ANSWERING.

SUDDENLY IT'S THERE.

A SUDDEN DROP IN THE AIR PRESSURE.

A DISTANT WAFT OF SULFUR.

RAIS!

UGH....UGNNN...
UGH...GNGNNN...

RAIS! OH MY GOD, NOT YOU!

I DON'T UNDERSTAND. THE NANOTINS SHOULD HAVE KILLED ALL THE INFECTION.

THIS IS MORE THAN A MEDICAL INFECTION, DOCTOR SHARMA.

B-BE AT PEACE...FATHER. I ALLOWED...THE EVIL ONE...TO POSSESS ME...

WH-WHEN IT GRABBED YOUR THROAT?

Y-YOU AND I... ARE BOTH PRIESTS NOW. SO LET MY BODY...UGH...B-BE THE *BATTLEGROUND*... WHERE WE DEFEAT THE DEMON...

AAGHH! MERCIFUL JESUS...HELP ME! AGHHHH!

I OFFERED HER TO YOU, YASS. YOU WANTED HER...YET SOME FOOLISH MORAL SCRUPLES...MADE YOU TURN HER DOWN.

NOW I SHALL HAVE HER.

I WANT TO SCREAM OBSCENITIES AT THE FOUL THING POSSESSING RAIS.

THEN I REMEMBER RAIS' WORDS.

...WHEN FIGHTING A DEMON...ONE SHOULD NEVER LOSE ONE'S TEMPER...

AND SO I HOLD MY TONGUE, AND I PRAY AGAIN.

BE A TOWER OF STRENGTH FOR HER, OH LORD.

I READY MYSELF FOR ONE LAST BATTLE...

A BATTLE I MUST NOT LOSE.

...DEPART, ACCURSED ONE...DEPART WITH ALL YOUR DECEITS...

AAAUGHH!

THE EXORCISM EBBS AND FLOWS.

NEVER HAVE I FELT MORE COMMITTED.

I FEEL RAIS FIGHTING, TOO.

UGH!

SHE IS MINE, PRIEST!

I FEEL HER WRESTLING WITH THE DEMON INSIDE HER.

SHE ALLOWED THE DEMON IN, SO SHE COULD DEFEAT IT.

I AM IN AWE.

COULD I EVER HAVE THAT COURAGE?

THAT KIND OF FAITH?

ON THE THIRD DAY--

LET HER REST. UNLESS WE CAN LOWER HER HEART RATE, SHE'LL HAVE A ***MASSIVE CORONARY.***

DOCTOR, I'M FIGHTING FOR HER ***IMMORTAL SOUL!***

AND ***MY*** CONCERN IS HER ***MORTAL BODY.***

P-PLEASE... CONTINUE.

I CAN FEEL...THE DEMON'S GRIP... LOOSENING...

AND SO THE FIGHT GOES ON.

AND IN MY WEARINESS I SEE ***STRANGE VISIONS...***

OR MAYBE NOT QUITE SO VERY STRANGE...

THE HOUR OF RECKONING APPROACHES.

F-FATHER... IT IS THE ***END.*** G-GIVE ME... TH-THE ***LAST RITES***...

FIRST... THERE'S SOMETHING I MUST SAY.

QUICKLY... DON'T HAVE... MUCH TIME...

TH-THIS DEMON... IT HAS BEEN WITH ME FOR SO LONG. EVER SINCE I BECAME A ***PRIEST***...

THE TRUTH, LORD.

GIVE ME THE STRENGTH TO FACE THE TRUTH.

"EVER SINCE I WAS FORCED TO LIE TO MYSELF ABOUT THE KIND OF MAN I WAS..."

I AM STILL LYING.

I BLAMED THE DEVIL...FOR MY IMPERFECTIONS...FOR MY LUSTFUL FEELINGS FOR YOU. I BLAMED EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING BUT ***MYSELF.***

BUT ***I*** WAS TO BLAME FOR WHAT HAPPENED BETWEEN US. I ***ALONE.***

IF I AM BEING HAUNTED BY A DEMON...IT IS BECAUSE I INVITED HIM IN. I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY IMPERFECTIONS.

FORGIVE ME...FOR I HAVE SINNED.

THROUGH THE GRACE OF GOD...YOU ARE FORGIVEN.

A LIGHTENING OF THE LOAD?

DO I FEEL SOMETHING SHIFT?

LET HER SLEEP NOW.

WHEN SHE WAKES SIX HOURS LATER, THE VERY AIR FEELS PURER.

YOU SEEM CHANGED, FATHER.

I FEEL IT. THE DEMON HAS DEPARTED. YOU HAVE DEFEATED HIM.

NO.

WE *BOTH* HAVE.

ALL RIGHT, WE'RE AGREED YOU'RE BOTH WONDERFUL PEOPLE.

NOW WE HAVE TO GET THIS YOUNG WOMAN INTO A ***STEM CELL TUBE*** AND REBUILD SOME OF THE ***DAMAGED TISSUE*** OF HER HEART.

DON'T LOOK SO WORRIED, FATHER. WE HAVE FOUGHT THE DEVIL. WHAT MORE IS THERE TO FEAR?

WHAT MORE, INDEED?

YOU'RE OUTLAWS, PRACTICERS OF A ***BANNED RELIGION***, GUILTY OF ATTEMPTING AN ***ILLEGAL EXORCISM.***

I'D LIKE TO SEND YOU BOTH TO OUR HARSHEST PENAL COLONY.

WHAT CITIZEN RELISH ***MEANS*** IS...YOU'RE FREE TO LEAVE CAL IV.

NOT FREE. THERE ARE... ***CONDITIONS.***

I DO NOT KNOW THE BYZANTINE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SPYMASTER AND THE HEAD OF PLANETARY SECURITY.

BUT GOD MOVES IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS.

*WE SIGN STATEMENTS SAYING IT WAS **RELISH'S SCIENTISTS** AND NOT US WHO "CURED" PROFESSOR CZAJKA.*

I SUSPECT THAT CZAJKA HAS BEEN FORCED TO SIGN A SIMILAR LIE.

THE FOLLOWING DAY, A SHIP PREPARES TO LEAVE CAL IV.

I'LL LEAVE THIS BIBLE WITH YOU, MARLOV. MAYBE ONE DAY YOU'LL JOIN US.

I'LL TAKE IT...BUT PURELY FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES.

AFTER ALL, THERE IS NO RELIGION ON CAL IV.

HOLY BIBLE

AND SOON WE ARE ON A MINING PLANET, WHOSE NAME IS NOT IMPORTANT.

EVEN WITH MASKS, THE FOUL AIR SCALDS OUR THROATS AND LUNGS.

QUICK... BEFORE WE'RE SEEN. THERE HAVE BEEN ***PURGES OF BELIEVERS*** LATELY...

WE ARE HERE TO CELEBRATE AN ILLEGAL MASS WITH A DWINDLING CONGREGATION.

I PASS THE TRANSUB AND STAND BACK.

CONTENT TO SERVE AS LOYAL **ASSISTANT** AND **ACOLYTE** TO ONE WHOSE FAITH WAS ALWAYS GREATER THAN MY OWN.

MAY THE SPIRIT OF THE DIVINE TOUCH YOU.

UHH!

AMEN!

THE END

ISSUE #1 VARIANT
BY MIKE DEODATO JR.
AND LEE LOUGHRIDGE

The Gospel According to PETER

Issue 1

As I write this, I have Covid. I'm actually writing this from my bed. I can't go out, can't mix with people, and wouldn't much want to anyway.

But some part of me would like to leave this bed and this house, catch a train or a taxi, and find someplace where Covid doesn't exist and I therefore don't feel like crap. I know in reality that wouldn't work. The Covid is inside me and I'll take it wherever I go.

What does this all have to do with a story set in the far future when mankind has left Earth and colonized distant planets?

I read one of those articles some time ago, about where the future of mankind might lie. One part of the article talked about how we'd probably flee Earth, which by then would be a pretty poisonous, inhospitable place. We'd find new untouched planets and, the implication was, everything would be hunky dory.

Was the writer suggesting our problems came from the very Earth we'd despoiled? That's a little like me blaming this warm bed for my Covid and telling myself that if only I could get as far from it as possible I'd be okay.

I thought, these future humans will take their demons with them.

And then I thought, what if humankind literally carried demons with them to these far-flung worlds? SACRAMENT – or the thing that'd grow into SACRAMENT – was born.

For where there are demons ... there must be an exorcist. But what kind of man – or woman – plies this ancient trade on the scattered worlds of the future? A future where religion itself is outlawed, seen as a dangerous relic from mankind's Earth-bound past.

Enter Father Vass and his adoring novice Rais. One clinging onto the tattered remnants of his faith, the other full of religious fervor. They have attended exorcisms before ... but when a man is possessed on the futuristic capital of Cal IV they will face their sternest test. And they'll be fighting more than one demon.

I love possession/exorcism stories, or at least I like the idea of them. How huge themes of good versus evil can be played out on the battleground of a victim's body and soul. SACRAMENT is my version of one such story, but it's unlike any exorcism you've seen.

The Gospel According to MARCELO

Finally, with SACRAMENT, I have the pleasure of drawing my first Sci-Fi Horror story, one of my favorite genres without a doubt. When I read the plot, I said, "This story is great!" The idea that man leaves Earth but unknowingly takes the devil with him seemed powerful to me.

Man has colonized space. Social classes are divided and inhabiting different planets. Some are so miserable that only the remains of what once was an important religion can give their souls relief. Meanwhile, on other planets where the elite live, science dominates and religion has disappeared. But that future dominated by science will be shaken by a horror that it does not understand. Ritual murders and nightmares invade the population. When rational explanations fail, they turn to the ancient religion and hope that it might be able to confront the entity that is attacking the colonies. A tormented priest, on the verge of losing his faith, will be the one chosen to face the demon. In this fight he will seek redemption for his sins and give new meaning to his life.

I had the pleasure of drawing spaceships and their high-tech interiors, imagining planets and futuristic cities, and, of course, creating macabre scenes of demons, murders, and possessed people. I have enjoyed designing every character, object, and setting, every little detail of those future worlds, and thinking about what those extraterrestrial environments colonized by man would look like.

I also tried to give the color an alien aspect in the exteriors, a deadly and insane atmosphere in the work colonies, and skies with strange colors on the different planets. In the interiors and the city, I tried to illuminate with artificial lights of varied colors, to give each scene an unsettling atmosphere.

In summary, I have tried with design and color to imbue the story with alien horror. I hope I have achieved it.

Hopefully readers enjoy this story as much as I have.

IT IS THE YEAR OF OUR LORD ... 2999 ...

ISSUE #1 GALAXYCON
EXCLUSIVE VARIANT
BY MIKE CHOI

SON OF ULTRON

"THIS FAN... THIS MONSTER!"